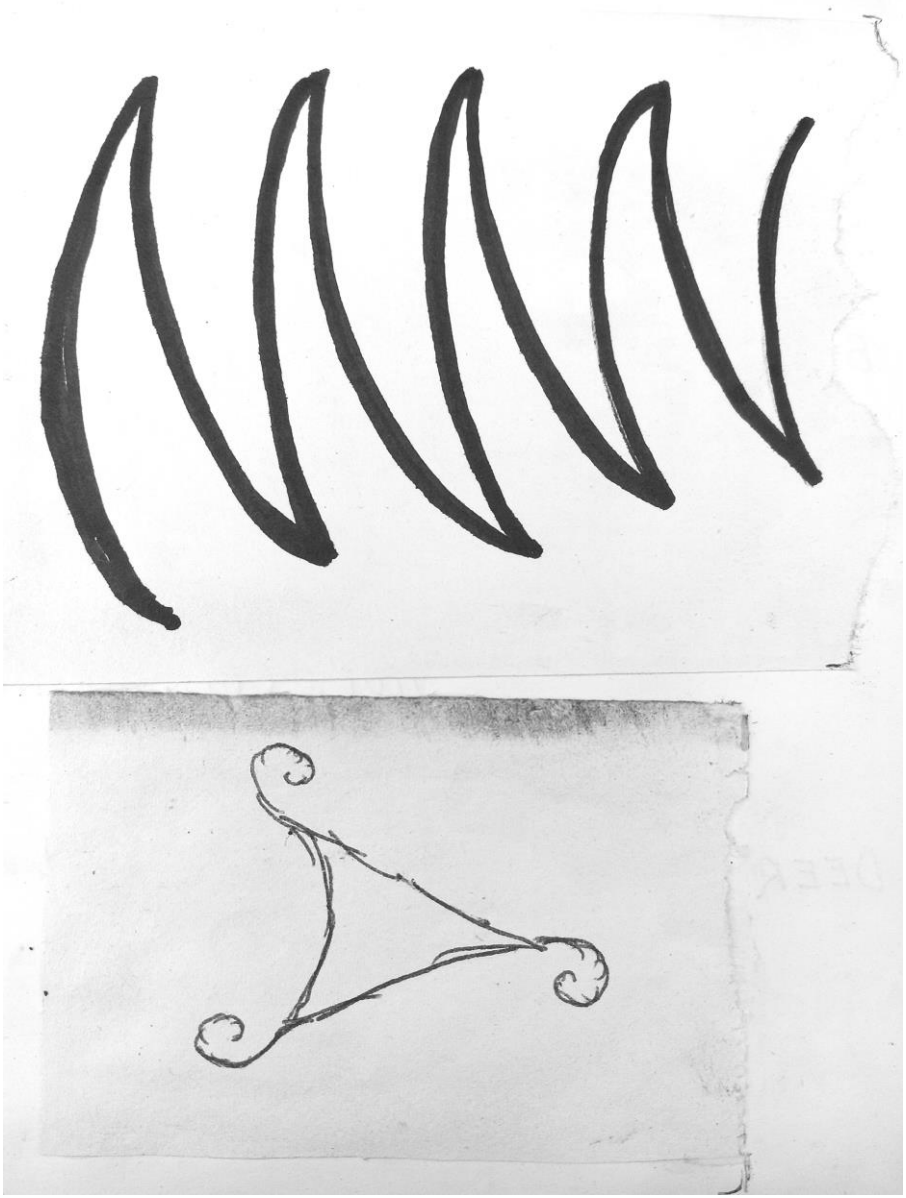


Mini Zine of Irish Dreams

this zine flowed out of a container called "ancestral reconnection for witches and radicals of celtic descent," facilitated by rowan, a friend whose work can be found at www.ofhawthornandyew.com. that container invited us to "deepen our connection to our values alongside the plants and practices from lineages of the celtic isles," and to work on tangible projects along those lines.

it also came out of my own need for healing after years of trauma. it seems that when the living humans around me struggled to hold space, the ancestors were there. they had been through everything i have, and more. connecting with them has been deeply healing as well as challenging to me.

this zine also came out of the literal darkest part of the year, which i am learning to see as a time for incubating and dreaming. it is mostly a collection of other people's words that got me thinking and feeling. i've never made a proper zine before. my dearest hope for this one is that it can be a conversation starter amongst friends.

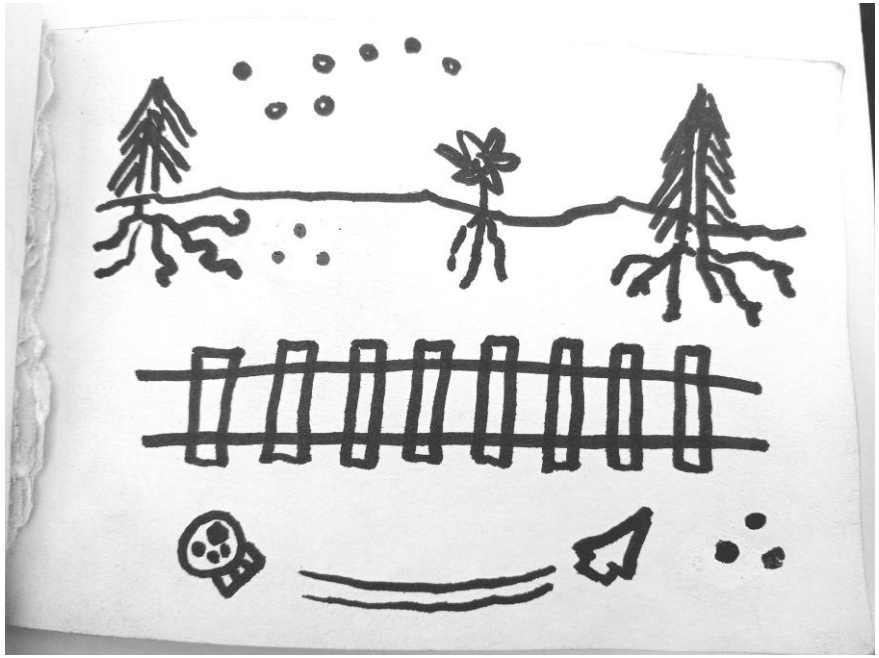


Table of contents

4 *Cáithnín* by James Ireland

7 excerpt from "Revising Atrocious Cultural Histories through Theatre: Oliver Cromwell and Genocide in Ireland" by James Ireland

9 excerpts from "The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves and the Atlantic Working Class in the Eighteenth Century" by Marcus Rediker and Peter Linebaugh, from the anthology *Gone to Croatan: Origins of North American Dropout Culture* by Ron Sakolsky

13 excerpt *from The Forest Reminds Us Who We Are: Connecting to the Living Medicine of Wild Plants* by Seán Pádraig O'Donoghue

18 excerpt from *Thin Places* by Kerri ní Dochartaigh

25 excerpt from *Tinkers* by Paul Harding

27 doodles (by me)

***Cáithnín* By James Ireland**

[One woman. Cold wind. Labhraíonn sí.]

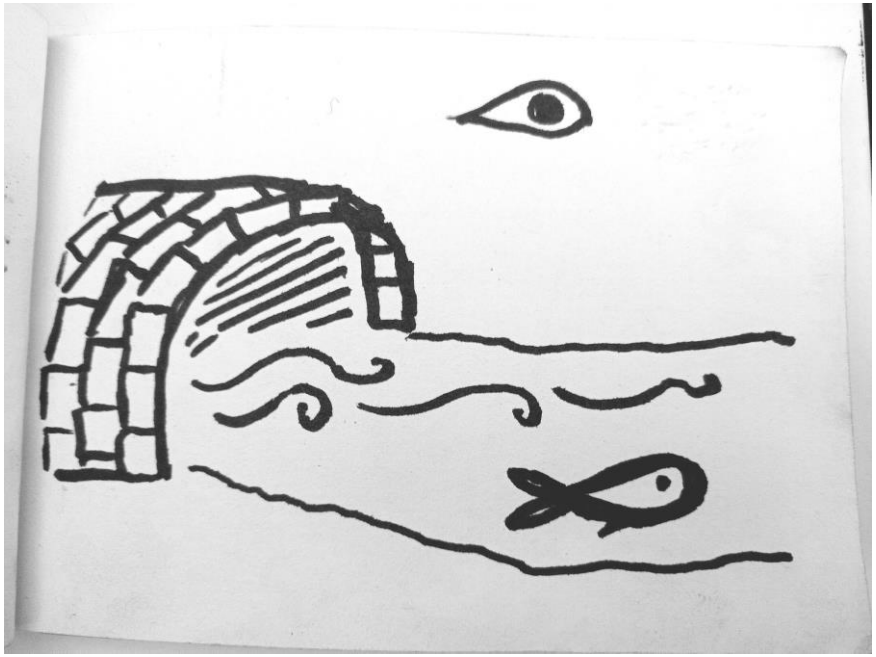
SÍ.
It begins first dark earth land connected continent retreat ice and flood comes in, the climate
is changing.

Three thousand metre tall ice sheet wall rip through glen log, sliabh, carraig, sciúradh an
tírdhreacha now gone. Across the sea we arrive.

Some stay at coast. Water. Spray. Red sunset. They remember phosphorescence on seaweed
and feeling you get when you're out at sea at dawn and you're the only person alive ever
before or ever since. But what I remember is trees, scots pine, thinner on uplands so there we
settle, clearing trees and smell of tree sap trunk cut firewood spit, in the morning tracks of
wolves.

Then one thousand years the soil is empty, we move off mountain we move inland, inland,
and we clear trees too. Sphagnum moss grow over animalskin thatch huts we left behind. We
repeat. We creep downwind when we hunt. We love and we cry in thunderstorms. I lay in the
sun dreaming and a thin film is settling itself between me and my world. At some point I fall
asleep.

And when I wake up.



City. Carbon-black turf-cut mountainside scar, metal glass sky-cut tarmac-sealed monstrous
smoke scar ship container oil earth-blood, machine. Mountain dust water pump crust fracture
net catch bottom trawl life screech, bigger, bigger, bigger, worse.

Asphalt grass square manicure cut down nitrogen grow steal earth dig mineral burn, platinum
war lithium conquer chlorpyrifos nitrogen soak grow and cut, grow and cut, grow and cut
and shop deliver fly freight naphtha kerosene hydrocarbon burn now more ice melt so fume
smoke more grow kill force feed take ask force pull tear build tear scratch scrape scour earth
break still scrape force tear more. Sessile oak? Mac tíre? Neamhláithreacht.

Somewhere on ocean, someone remembers a feeling. Dawn. Of no-one before and no-one
since. Being only person in world. The feeling of iarmhaireacht creeping up. Somewhere
someone else remembers sun on shoulderblades and dreaming, a scim descending on their
eyes as they succumb to sleep. I, awake now on top of my mountain, I listen.

[Cold wind.]

Séideán gaoithe.

When we were asleep we made planetwide world-poison. Crithir. Solid foundation whole
earth shivering. Land almost gone. Planet almost gone. Our words almost. Thoughts gone.
But. In gust of wind séideán gaoithe rush as something else from our-world-but-other-world
passes by - there is still time to glimpse half-memory some miniscule spark last hope speck
caught in corner of my eye.
Cáithnín. Yes, cáithnín. A word for that now I remember it is cáithnín.

My your world contains an other world and our atoms connect. Our atoms belong to each
other. Today world-poison neamhláithreacht has inside beneath in the future of it another
world. Cáithnín, séideán gaoithe, scim, son of the land are our word relics buried of time. Dig
them out. Excavate. Find. Learn.

And I can heal. Care. Share. Take sparsely. Séideán gaoithe gifts energy between
world-poison now and future life. The sun gifts hydrogen helium shooting from space
radiance electron heat, accept it. We do not take from sphagnum moss bratphortach, instead
leave and grow, froach, bog orchid, fia, white tailed eagle, and sessile oak caorthann instead
of spruce plantation dead harvest, bring corn bunting, mud pond snail, meadow saxifrage,
wild boar, mac tíre. Turn grass square tarmac to birds-foot-trefoil, red clover, Devil's-bit
scabious, praiseach garbh, poipín, talamh móinéir. Turn tidal movement to electrons. To
cáithnín. Catch them. Keep them. Use them. Listen to them. Work with them.

Follow them. The climate is changing. Tá cneasú air.

James Ireland is a gender nonconforming playwright/theatremaker. They recently graduated from the MA Writing programme at the RCA (London), where they researched actionable allyship in theatre producing. Previous work includes productions at The New Theatre and Smock Alley (Dublin), as well as The Arcola, Pleasance, and Theatre Deli (London).
Instagram: @chickenfilletrollmemes
www.jamesirelandplaywright.com

3. Those stories were ignorant. We sensed, finally, the foolishness of attributing the unknown to secret cabals, to conspiracies. Everything was almost always obscure. Understanding shone when it did, for no discernable reason, and we were content. We built our town, then, out of whatever came our way, or whatever we got in the way of, so that we dwelled in huts of hair, in nests of wrappers and tinsel and string, which we looped through nuts and hung from the ceilings with a bit of tape or a piece of old gum because they all had different threads from the bolts we found. Town Hall was constructed of drinking straws (some with elbows, most not) and hubcaps and the foil from cigarette packages. Any number of people lived in the crooks of trees beneath tented Sunday newspapers, which were aged brown by the sun. When it rained, these buildings swelled and then turned to pulp and washed away and the tenants would dry themselves in the sun when it came back out and begin again to collect tin cans and nickels and matchboxes and greasy paper boats that had once held french fries or onion rings. 4. The green sea turned gray and its surface rolled like a membrane. When we dived for shells, it parted for us without resistance and sealed itself behind our up-pointed toes. We felt around, blind, in its slick graphite body, we sifted its sand and came up with smooth stones for our mantles of wind and mist, and whatever of it was held in our hair when we surfaced ran out like quicksilver and rejoined the rest of itself, seamless, molecular, slick, atomic. We traveled in pods. We breached surfaces and caught glimpses of sheer cliffs, columns of flint capped in fir, boreal. We saw beaches of snow and blizzards of sand. 5. When it came time to die, we knew and went to deep yards where we lay down and our bones turned to brass. We were picked over. We were used to fix broken clocks, music boxes; our pelvises were fitted onto pinions, our spines soldered into vast works. Our ribs were fitted as gear teeth and tapped and clicked like tusks. This is how, finally, we were joined.

Revising Atrocious Cultural Histories through Theatre: Oliver Cromwell and Genocide in Ireland

By James Ireland

THERE IS A STATUE of Oliver Crowell outside the Houses of Parliament in Westminster. Whenever lists of the greatest Britons are compiled he regularly sits in and around the top ten. He designed and executed genocide against the indigenous population of Ireland. Yet, by some, he is celebrated.

How can we interrupt the narrative of the "cultural hero" in cases where that "hero" should not be celebrated? How should we best stage cultural interventions in cases where the cultural narrative has been rewritten to omit incriminating parts? One of the most powerful things about theatre and other performance-based media is its ability to cultivate empathy. What is being depicted — performed — happens with real live people. Perhaps, here, in theatre, we can create forceful art, sitting people down in front of it: real bodies, real presence, real human beings. Perhaps this interruption of the real with a different real could work.

In this article I detail some of my research as a playwright investigating methods to intervene in the cultural celebration of atrocious people. My aim is to create a piece of theatre that, when consumed, will make someone feel uneasy — conflicted — dirty — perhaps a little culpable — at their next encounter with Oliver Cromwell. In this way, I hope to contribute to the rewriting of the narrative that surrounds him. The play *We Didn't Kill the Wolves (It was Cromwell)* has been developed as part of the Act II Festival in London. Rehearsal and development was directed by Catherine V. Mclean, with ensemble members Mia Kitty Barbe-Wilson, Ceara Harper, Tom Hunter, Magnus Korsaeth, and Louis Vichard. At the time of writing, development is ongoing.

Overview

In 1649, Oliver Cromwell led his New Model Army into Ireland to re-conquer the country for England and exact revenge for the Irish Rebellion of 1641. Cromwell commanded an army that massacred civilians in Drogheda and Wexford under no-quarter orders, enacted laws and directives that historians argue amounted to attempted genocide, and shaped the savagery of his successor Henry Ireton's command. Cromwell signed the Act for the Settlement of Ireland in 1652 and oversaw further ratification in 1657 as Lord Protector of the Commonwealth. The act ordered summary executions, mass land confiscation, and forcible deportations of indigenous Irish to the West of Ireland, and as "indentured servants" to plantations in the Caribbean. Irish resistance was strong as they fought for their lives and culture. They tied branches together in forests to form impenetrable thickets against advancing armies; but the English burned those forests. Estimates suggest between 10 to 41 percent of the Irish population were murdered between 1649-53. By 1659, after ensuing famine and the settlement of English Protestants, the drop in the indigenous population has been approximated by some to be as high as 83 percent.

In writing the play around Cromwell, I set some parameters from the outset:

1. Irish people and their culture would be the primary focus — not the story of the English. There is a place for close analysis of the perspectives of colonisers, but voices and stories of the colonised should come first. British cultural representations of the effects of colonisation in Ireland are poor, barely presenting the stories of Irish people from the time of the Cromwellian Conquest — nor from many other points in history.
2. Oliver Cromwell — although not the focus in character development — should feature. It is a key part of the project's aims that the audience leave the theatre feeling culpable in the perpetuation of Cromwell's status as a British hero.
3. The play should be within reasonable means to produce. This parameter foregrounds questions about projected budget of realising the writing, potential tourability, response to programming trends, and the quality/ entertainment value of the play.

This article will focus on my development of the character of Cromwell, in pursuit of parameter two, within a larger body of research about potential story, structure, genre, style, and form.

Homo Borealis:

1. We kicked the bark off of dead trees and the soft wood beneath was as pale as sawdust and sometimes covered with strange designs that looked like writing that had been drawn into the wood with a stylus or fine-carving tool and the bark then fitted back over the trunk-a rough skin, a splintery hide that protected the secret language. These hieroglyphs we discovered like revelations, like messages someone had left for us alone to discover and to ponder and to poke and scratch at with our sticks but not to understand and to leave like totems for whomever they were actually meant while we crashed away through the bushes. 2. We made up stories about men who had been tattooed with intricate and important instructions. The tattoos were inked into deep layers and the men would be recognized by long, I-shaped scars on their backs, which would have to be recut and the skin opened like a pair of doors to reveal braids of muscle and the secret script. Of course, the men would not know that they were the bearers of these signs. And of course the people who were supposed to read these messages had to go through a very long and difficult process of deciphering obscure clues and directions in order to find these special couriers, in order to protect both the man and the message. The seeker would find the messenger; he would find himself recognizing the messenger as the messenger was trying to sell him an old horse, or serving him breakfast at an inn, or com plaining about politicians during the morning coffee break.

yet to come. There is nothing you can do but listen for the gap in the silence, the change in the wind.

The right moment, when it comes, calls you up, up; calls you into a wind that lifts you. A wind that carries you with it, on its tails.

Watch.

First the curlews, next the moth, and now – you.

The Many Headed Hydra

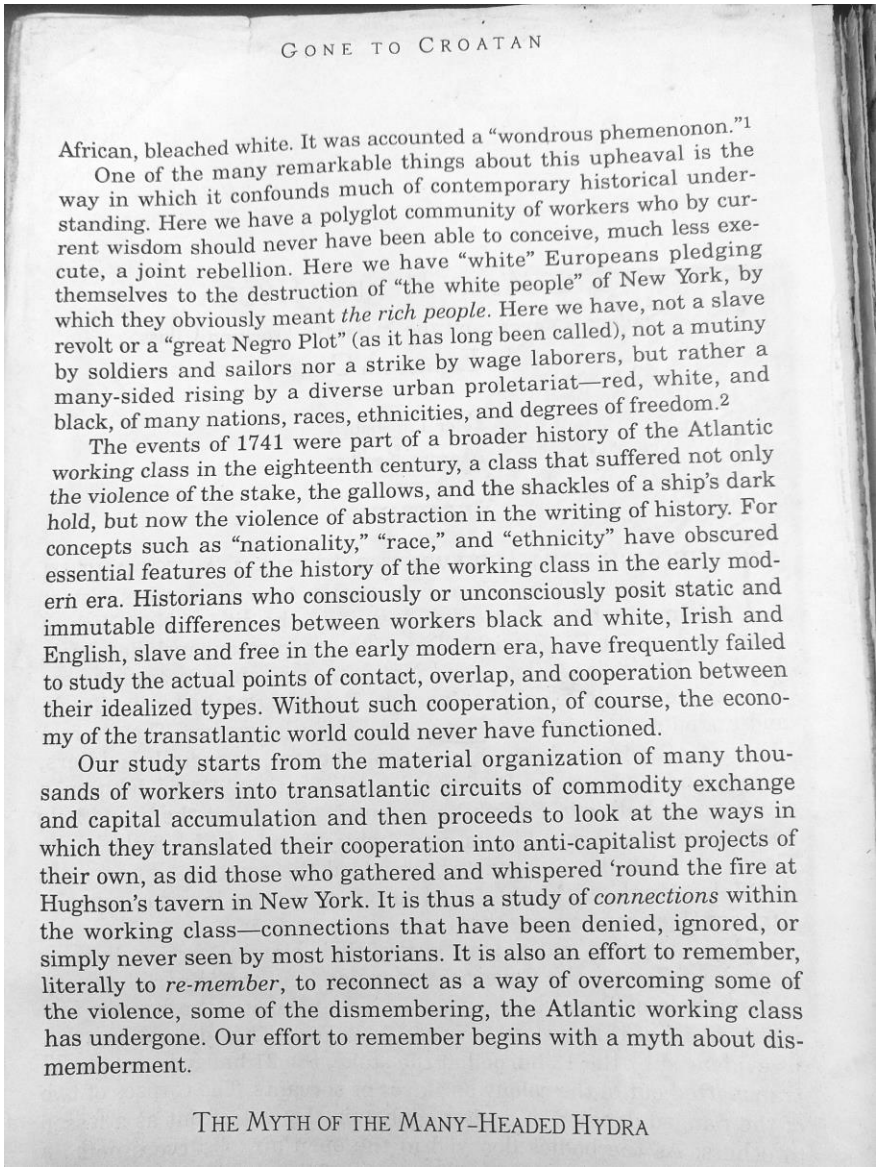
Sailors, Slaves, and the Atlantic Working Class in the Eighteenth Century

Peter Linebaugh
Marcus Rediker

Introduction

THROUGH THE HARSH WINTER OF 1740-41, AS FOOD RIOTS broke out all over Europe, a motley crew of workers met at John Hughson's waterside tavern in the city of New York to plan a rising for St. Patrick's Day. The conspirators included Irish, English, Hispanic, African, and Native American men and women; they spoke Gaelic, English, Spanish, French, Dutch, Latin, Greek, and undoubtedly several African and Indian languages. They were a mixture of mostly slaves and wage laborers, especially soldiers, sailors, and journeymen. During their deliberations, David Johnson, a journeyman hatter of British background, swore that "he would help to burn the town, and kill as many white people as he could." John Corry, an Irish dancing-master, promised the same, as, apparently, did John Hughson himself and many others, a large number of African-Americans among them.

Eventually they put at least part of their plan into action, burning down Fort George, the Governor's mansion, and the imperial armory, the symbols of Royal Majesty and civil authority, the havens and instruments of ruling-class power in New York. They did not succeed, as evidenced by the 13 burned at the stake, the 21 hanged, and the 77 transported out of the colony as slaves or servants. The corpses of two of the hanged dangled in an iron gibbet on the waterfront as a lesson to others. As the bodies decayed in the open air, observers noted a gruesome, yet instructive, transformation. The corpse of an Irishman turned black and his hair curly while the corpse of Caesar, the



African, bleached white. It was accounted a "wondrous phemenonon."[1]

One of the many remarkable things about this upheaval is the way in which it confounds much of contemporary historical understanding. Here we have a polyglot community of workers who by current wisdom should never have been able to conceive, much less execute, a joint rebellion. Here we have "white" Europeans pledging themselves to the destruction of "the white people" of New York, by which they obviously meant *the rich people*. Here we have, not a slave revolt or a "great Negro Plot" (as it has long been called), not a mutiny by soldiers and sailors nor a strike by wage laborers, but rather a many-sided rising by a diverse urban proletariat—red, white, and black, of many nations, races, ethnicities, and degrees of freedom.[2]

The events of 1741 were part of a broader history of the Atlantic working class in the eighteenth century, a class that suffered not only the violence of the stake, the gallows, and the shackles of a ship's dark hold, but now the violence of abstraction in the writing of history. For concepts such as "nationality," "race," and "ethnicity" have obscured essential features of the history of the working class in the early modern era. Historians who consciously or unconsciously posit static and immutable differences between workers black and white, Irish and English, slave and free in the early modern era, have frequently failed to study the actual points of contact, overlap, and cooperation between their idealized types. Without such cooperation, of course, the economy of the transatlantic world could never have functioned.

Our study starts from the material organization of many thousands of workers into transatlantic circuits of commodity exchange and capital accumulation and then proceeds to look at the ways in which they translated their cooperation into anti-capitalist projects of their own, as did those who gathered and whispered 'round the fire at Hughson's tavern in New York. It is thus a study of *connections* within the working class—connections that have been denied, ignored, or simply never seen by most historians. It is also an effort to remember, literally to *re-member*, to reconnect as a way of overcoming some of the violence, some of the dismembering, the Atlantic working class has undergone. Our effort to remember begins with a myth about dismemberment.

THE MYTH OF THE MANY-HEADED HYDRA

The reeds are ready for cutting now, in November; their strong roots will still bind the soil along the banks together the whole year through, a delicate winter weaving. In ancient times, reeds were held as guardians. They are the botanical marker for the days around Samhain – when, it was believed, the veil between worlds lifts – until 24 November: the date, almost a year ago, when I decided to stop drinking. I had no idea about the significance of the date until now. The reed's power, in Celtic tradition, is protection.

This *gealach*, this moon, the one I cannot see but that I know is there, is the last one before the winter solstice, and it is the last one I will stand beneath in this place; for how long, I am unsure. By the time the velvet darkness of the solstice has covered the winter land, I will already be far from these reeds and the moth, the lighthouse and the curlews. I will be far from Shroove, from Donegal, from Derry; I will be too far from here to be seen, no matter what the light is doing above the sea.

No more, enough already: the moment is here to leave. I have carried too much sorrow into this water for one lifetime. The tide is shifting; the moment in Derry – in the North – across the UK in general – is uncertain, and full of that same hidden violence I spent my childhood stepping over like delicate eggshells, just waiting for it to erupt. I cannot, and will not, live through it all again. I am making ready to leave the city in which I was born; I am leaving its feathery ghosts here – where its river meets the sea.

Enough already: this time I am able, and ready, to leave. The time spent here has changed everything, unravelled all the threads that had long been tangled up in messy, rotting knots; nothing feels how it did before, and for that I am fiercely grateful.

There are places – like this one – which are so thin that you meet yourself in the still point. Like the lifting of the silky veil on Samhain, you are held in the space in between. No matter the past, the present or what is

follow the flow of the river across the border and into the North. Or maybe they will turn the other way, chart a path over fossil-traced bog-land, above gorse and *ceannbhán* – bog-cotton – where butterflies and moths have left fragments of their tissue wings. Maybe today they will choose to fly above estuary and stream, over the mountains of the Donegal Gaeltacht, their cries blending together with words in the native tongue of those they fly above, in the South. They nest all over this land, those of them that are left, on both sides of the border.

The season is turning; I felt it so fully in the water today. November's full moon marks the birth of a new Celtic year, at the same time as symbolising an end, the death of the old year. It is known as the mourning moon in Pagan tradition. In many cultures, this full moon is intimately connected with death and loss, on both a literal and symbolic level. Some folk call it the snow or fog moon, and I can both feel and see why, today, as I shiver beneath sea fog that hides the sun away. There is a pale yellow-grey hue to it, and a softness that could easily bring the snow. My ancestors knew it as the reed moon. I watch as the *giolcach* – the reeds – move about in the icy breeze, and I imagine my ancestors watching too, from a place, like the full moon, that I cannot see.

To the Druids and the Celts, almost everything in the natural world was tied in some way to the greater being – the spirit – of the earth. For our ancestors, our role in it all as guardians was one of unshakeable magnitude. In Ogham – ancient writing on stone – the letters are named for trees, an alphabet of arboreal forms, only some of which are still known to us. The etymology of the word 'ogham' is not fully known but it may have roots in the Irish *og úaim* – 'point-seam' – the trace left over by the point of a sharp weapon, the midway mark. The stones on which the writings are carved are themselves a form of marker, too. And the places in which they are found are sometimes as thin as a reed.

compatriots went to London, where they helped to make the London port strike of 1768.[27]

Indeed, the strike in London cannot be understood apart from Ireland, where the hangman's noose and the woodsman's axe had centuries before been the principle tools of the English Ascendency. Following the Williamite confiscations of the 1690s, the forests, and the human culture dependent upon them, were largely destroyed; the agrarian policy subsequently introduced into Ireland promoted pasturage for the export of cattle rather than an arable farming that could feed the population. As a result, a large population, having neither forests nor lands to subsist upon, either left the land altogether or submitted to a standard of subsistence so utterly mean that it beggared the powers of description of independent observers and caused even the rulers to wonder at how an oppressed population could tolerate such conditions. The Irish language was "banished from the castle of the chieftain to the cottage of the vassal," from whence in hard times it migrated to the boozing kens of London and the "low tippling houses" of American and Caribbean ports. The "Hidden Ireland"—its conspiratorial tradition and willingness to act outside the law—was carried along in the diaspora within people like Patrick Carr.[28]

The "Whiteboy Outrages," the name given to the largest and longest of agrarian rebellions in Ireland (1761-1765, with sporadic outbursts through 1788), was a major part of the subversive experience of the mobile Irish. These protests took place in a period of increased expropriation and accumulation, intensified by the demands of two world wars. With the outbreak of cattle disease, the murrain, in continental Europe, and the passage in 1759 of the Cattle Exportation Act, the value of Irish land increased greatly. The poorest of the cottiers who had a potato patch or a cow kept on the common land, suddenly found that even these were to be denied, as landlords, their agents, and bailiffs evicted them in search of new grazing lands, taking over whole baronies, and erecting walls, hedges, and fences to keep their herds in and the former tenants out. Against this, the Irish cottier and laborer reacted with what Lecky called "an insurrection of despair."[29]

In October, 1761, nocturnal bands of 200-400 people, dressed in flowing white frocks and white cockades, threw down fences enclosing lands in Tipperary. The movement quickly expanded to new areas in Cork, Kilkenny, Limerick, and Waterford, and to actions designed to redress other grievances, such as the manifold tithes (of potatoes,

agistment, turf, or furze) imposed by an alien religious establishment. Sounding horns, carrying torches, and riding commandeered horses, the Whiteboys opened gaols, rescued prisoners, attacked garrisons, stole arms, released 'prentices, maimed cattle, ploughed wasteland, prevented export of provisions, burned houses, reduced prices, and everywhere tore down walls, fences, hedges, and ditches. These rebels were originally known as, and often called, "the Levellers."

The overall strength of the Whiteboys remains unknown, though it was reported that 14,000 insurgents lived in Tipperary in 1763. Their largest gatherings, 500-700 strong, took place in 1762 in Cork and Waterford. Using military techniques, the poorest cottiers and laborers (many of them spalpeens, or migratory laborers) formed themselves into an autonomous organization quite separate from the middling and upper classes. Indeed, the proletarian experience of the hundreds of thousands of Irishmen who had soldiered in the French army since 1691 lay behind the Whiteboy movement.[30]

Of necessity much of their movement was anonymous and mysterious. It was conducted "under the sanction of being fairies," it was said in 1762, and led by mythological figures such as "Queen Sieve" who wrote,

> We, levellers and avengers for the wrongs done to the poor, have unanimously assembled to raze walls and ditches that have been made to inclose the commons. Gentlemen now of late have learned to grind the face of the poor so that it is impossible for them to live. They cannot even keep a pig or a hen at their doors. We warn them not to raise again either walls or ditches in the place of those we destroy, nor even to inquire about the destroyers of them. If they do, their cattle shall be houghed and their sheep laid open in the fields.

Whiteboy captains who would carry out these threats called themselves "Slasher," "Lightfoot," "Fearnot," and "Madcap Setfire."[31]

Theirs was a movement inspired by strong notions of justice. The High Sheriff of Waterford, for instance, could find no person willing to whip a convicted Whiteboy, though he offered 20 Guineas and though a large body of troops was present for the occasion. When English law was enforced, as in the hanging of Father Sheehy in 1766, the people undermined its effect. The earth over his grave was treated as holy

hands. Today is not one of those days. The only land that I can see from here is still in Ireland, across an invisible border, parts of both its sides are held in place by the ancient, changeable and wild Atlantic in front of me. This border – unseen, hand-drawn by man, and *for* him alone, too – has been the thread that has run through my life. A ghost vein on the map of my insides, it is a line that is political, physical, economical and geographical; yet it is a line I have never once set eyes upon. This invisible line – a border that skims the water I have just emerged from, as though it were a dragonfly – has been the cause of such sorrow and suffering, such trauma and loss, that I ran from its curves and coursing flow at the very first chance I got.

I was half the age I am now when I left my hometown. The year that I moved back, the UK voted to leave the EU. Despite the words about unity, solidarity and strength in togetherness, lots of people decided they wanted to choose a different path. Derry – my border town in the north-west of Ireland – known for being the place 'the Troubles' began, voted to remain. There is a very particular type of wisdom that is born out of witnessing unimaginable cruelty, out of the experience of dark, harrowing sorrow. I remember standing on this same beach just after that vote and weeping, memories surging through my insides like hidden tributaries. No more, no more, no more – we have all had enough already, enough for many lifetimes. That border has become a thread in the lives of so many more people between that day in 2016 and this one, three and a half years later.

The fog has lifted a little; to the right of me, its silky grey veil is still laid too low to allow the outline of Scotland to come into view. Now, just below the lighthouse, the *crotach* – the curlews – grace the middle part of the sky again. They are heading round the curve of the bay towards Greencastle, maybe even onwards yet. Maybe they are flying away from here, where Lough Foyle floods into the Atlantic Ocean, to

changes. The curlew's cry has shape-shifted into mournful lament – an elegy for all that is lost. For centuries, it has been taken as a sign of unbidden sorrow yet to come; the cries of those whistlers is a sound steeped in foreboding. Those creatures of coast, marsh and bog carrying disaster and grief, carefully, in the fine curves of their bills. This beach on which I stand, shivering and silvered by the salt of the Atlantic Ocean, is a perfect place for them – open, empty and desolate, at first glance. This beach – Shroove, Stroove, or Strove, depending on where you grew up – has a quality to it, a stillness, which lets me almost float away. It allows me to see things differently. It is as if the veil between worlds has become as thin as moth-wing. The lines that are normally drawn for and by us – between here and there, between now and then – seem as though they have been washed away, on some days. I shiver again, pull my arms in around the curve of my body and wonder if it is the sea that has made ghosts of what we think we know here, in this wee nook at this most northerly tip on this divided, broken island.

This shipping lane has been used for hundreds of years by ships carrying Irish emigrants to land far from where I stand – England, America, Australia, Canada. This rugged coastline has not only transported people, it has *stolen* them, too. She is a hungry sea, this one I am drawn to – pulled towards, tidally. She has claimed hundreds of ships, taken innumerable lives; the body of water in front of me holds a story of deepest loss within her belly.

Now, through the lifting mist, Ballycastle – in the north of Ireland – comes into view, only just. One moment the coastline is there, and then it isn't. It is a fleeting and flighty thing today, the outline of that other place across the sea – and border – from me. There are times at which, under certain conditions, Scotland can be seen from where I am standing, as clearly as if it were right there in front of you, as if you could hold it tenderly inside your own salty, shaky

Nettles *(Urtica dioica)*

I will end with a common plant, one quite different from the other medicines I have spoken of here. Nettles are at once nourishing and purifying, a perfect herb for helping the body navigate the transition from winter to spring, when they are one of the first wild greens present in abundance. I give them not as a drop dose tincture but as a tea or a food (and sometimes use them to sting myself, but we will get to that in a bit).

Nettle leaf soup, made with cream and butter, and sometimes seaweed, has nourished people in Ireland for thousands of years. Nettles are astoundingly nutritious. They contain more than three times as much protein and more than seventy-five times as much iron as Wheat or Barley and are also rich in calcium, magnesium, potassium, and vitamin C. The milk fat in the cream and butter in the soup aids in the absorption of many of those nutrients. Seaweed would add even more minerals.

Legend tells us that St. Colm Cille, the "Dove of the Church," exiled from Ireland to the island of Iona, was out walking one fine spring day and saw an old woman gathering Nettles. He asked her why she was doing this, and she told him that she mostly survived on Nettle soup. He then vowed to eat nothing but Nettle soup himself. A concerned monk convinced Colm Cille to allow him to prepare the soup, though, and secretly added broth to it each day.

If I were to put a client on a mono-diet, bone broth with Nettles would absolutely be my first choice. So too for my ancestors. Winter in the Irish countryside was traditionally a time of long nights spent around peat fires, taking shelter from the wind and the rain. When spring came, Nettle soup helped get the blood moving again. Irish folklorist Niall Mac Coitir writes: "Nettle was considered to be good for purifying the blood, and it was widely believed in Ireland that taking three meals of Nettles in May guarded against illness for the next year" (2017).

We now know, of course, that Nettles help the liver build blood proteins while helping the kidneys remove excess proteins (including metabolic wastes

and allergens) from the blood—making them both a blood builder and a blood cleanser in a much more literal way than we usually mean when we use such terms. (It is also an amazing hemostatic herb, helping to staunch blood loss.) Dr. Kenneth Proefrock notes that thinking and worrying are metabolic activities that produce a significant amount of proteinaceous waste.

Mac Coitir adds, "In west Galway, the man of the house would go out on May Eve and gather a handful of nettles. The nettles were pressed, and everyone in the house would drink a mouthful of the juice to 'keep a good fire in them' the rest of the year." That particular turn of phrase, "keep a good fire in them" suggests Nettles role in bringing motion back to the middle cauldron. It also reflects an understanding of the way that Nettles both help to fuel our metabolic fires and clear their "ash" in order to keep them burning cleanly.

Nettles certainly get the blood flowing when they sting! There is a popular saying in Gaeilge—*Neantóg a dhóigh mé agus cupóg a leigheas mé:* "Nettle burned me, and Dock cured me." Nettles and Dock often grow side by side, and a poultice of Dock leaves helps bring down the heat and intensity of a Nettle sting. But not everyone wants to avoid Nettle stings! Because they do get the blood flowing, Nettle stings are a tried and true remedy for arthritis and gout. I have also found them a great remedy for the lethargy and depression that linger longer into springtime from winter than feels right. It is a powerful shock of electricity that can waken a nervous system or shock it into the present moment. A few drops of Lobelia will make the body even more receptive, and a few drops of Prickly Ash can bring a complementary stimulation and help the current move more efficiently through the body.

Mac Coitir reports another Irish Nettle tradition: "In southern parts of County Cork, May Eve was known as 'Nettlemas Night,' when boys would parade the streets with large bunches of Nettles, stinging their playmates and occasionally unfortunate passersby who got too close. Girls would join in too, stinging their lovers or boys for whom they held affection." Nettle stings bring an intense sensation and a rush of energy. If the Nettle leaves

drinking it all in. I bathe in her silent, gossamer grace. I watch her for what feels like a hundred years – one hundred years and this one, solitary day. The winter sun is high enough above the lighthouse to make the reeds double on themselves. Their silhouettes now join her in shadow play; they seem as if they are weaving themselves together and dancing in time with her. I am on my own, on the outside, looking in at the reeds and the moth; as if I am on the other side of an ice-sculpted lake or a mirror. They are right here beside me yet they feel so completely out of reach.

I tiptoe around the edges, and I feel myself outside time, as well as place. Now I am in both and in neither all at once.

I gratefully wait on the threshold, holding my breath as the reeds dance, grass goddesses on the hushed dunes, beside an ethereal, exquisite *leamhan.*

A winter moth, in a weightless, willowy place.

I begin to dry myself. The water today was icy and the sea's waves tall and white as snow, like mountains she had given birth to overnight. I am shivering, now, violently, on the wet November sand, but I feel like I have been made new, somehow. There is almost full silence. All that undoes it are the soft sounds of the *dreoilín* – a wren – and the water as it ebbs and flows out at the horizon.

Then, all out of nowhere a deep, melancholy cry rings out over the dunes. A call that speaks of wildness, of solitude, of survival and unimaginable beauty. Twelve curlews are in flight in the sky above my head, calling out over the edges of the eastern coast of the Inishowen Peninsula. They are the same colour as the dunes, the grasses and the other winged creature on the beach, that almost otherworldly moth. Their call is haunting – a siren song written long ago, and it drags me with it: out of myself, and back in again – out and in, like a wing beat, or ebbing breath.

They have long held a place in our history as a marker, these folkloric birds: of the past, of the cruel and melancholy passing of time with all its irrevocable

Prologue

WHEN I FIRST SEE HER she is as still as a found stone, in an ancient and hidden place. She stands out, a quiet caller of the eye – her markings blend in so delicately in this place, against the grasses and the thistle, the sand that marks the Atlantic Ocean from the land. I am at *An tSrúibh* – Shroove Beach – completely alone, miles across the border from my home in Derry, when we cross one another's path.

She looks so calm, unstirring in spite of the winds that now set the tall grasses on the beach to dance. She is so beautiful – I may even call her celestial – that I almost feel I have no right to be here. In this moment, in this place, with this graceful wonder, what part can I play in her story, in the narrative of this ethereal offering of a creature? I begin to feel that I am not, in fact, even 'seeing' her. It is more an act of witness. There is so little action in the small part I play on this near-winter morning, at a part of the Inishowen Peninsula where Lough Foyle meets the wild Atlantic, at the edge-land of Donegal, in one of the most northerly places on the island of Ireland.

We have found ourselves in a state of turmoil here, in the North of Ireland, and all the other parts that make up the United Kingdom are caught up in the same storm. It is November 2019, and next month the first Christmas Election in decades will take place. The air has been charged for many months with worry and confusion but none of that seems real, here, amidst such silent serenity.

She dances. She is the centre of it all, the still point on the map, a heavenly and delicate thing, too sacred for words. I am only the beholder, here, and I am

are a fitting medicine for the spring equinox, the Nettle sting certainly has a fitting place in youthful rites at Lá Bealtaine, with all their wild innocence.

Not all of Nettle's associations in Ireland are quite so joyful. During the An Gorta Mór, the Great Hunger, in the 1840s a million Irish died of starvation and disease and a million more fled for England or Canada or the United States or were shipped as prisoners to Australia—all while the occupying British continued to export thousands of shiploads of food grown on Irish soil to London and Liverpool and Glasgow.

Even today, the landscape in the West of Ireland is marked by the foundations of tumbledown cottages—remnants of that period—now grown over with Nettles. So common is the sight, that examples of the use of the word *neantóga* include *tá neantóga san áit a raibh an teach tráth* and *tá neantóga mar a raibh an teach tráth*—two ways of saying "there are Nettles where the house once was."

But Nettles also represent resilience. Few people know that the Great Hunger was in part a long-term consequence of the British campaign of deforestation that all but eradicated Ireland's great Oak and Hazel forests, depriving people of the Deer and Boar they once hunted and the Hazelnuts they once gathered. This deforestation also silted the streams where Salmon once swam and let the wind and rain sweep the soil into the sea. This soil depletion made Ireland's small farms especially susceptible to disasters like the blight that struck the potatoes in the 1840s. Nettles are famous for their ability to grow in and restore fertility to poor soils. Along with seaweed, they are one of the wild foods that kept many alive through the Great Hunger.

Peadar Kearney, an Irish songwriter born a generation later saw the spirit of Ireland as an old woman gathering Nettles while remembering the glories and mourning the loss of Irish men who had died in the country's many uprisings.

'Twas down by the glenside,
I met an old woman,
A-plucking young nettles,
Nor thought I was coming;

I listened awhile
To the song she was humming,
"Glory O, glory O,
To the Bold Fenian men!"

'Tis fifty long years
since I saw the moon beaming
And strong manly forms,
Their eyes with hope gleaming
I see them again
Sure, through all my days dreaming,
"Glory O, glory O,
To the Bold Fenian men!"

The Fenians were rebels who took their name from the Fianna, bands of warriors who lived in the forest, serving no one chieftain or province, but instead defending the land and the people. They were also trained as ecstatic poets and the visions they experienced in the forest would guide their actions in protecting the vulnerable. The first Fianna were trained by Fionn mac Cumhail, a warrior who had gained wisdom in his youth by accidentally eating the first bit of oil that splattered from the body of the Salmon from the Otherworld Well that his Druid teacher had caught and asked him to prepare.

In Kearney's time, another generation of Fenians rose up and won independence for all but the North of Ireland in Na Cogadh na Saoirse (the War of Freedom). He fought among them and wrote the national anthem for the Irish Republic. The Republic the former Fenian soldiers formed emerged on an island ecologically devastated by centuries of intensive occupation and exploitation. Perhaps if left to do their work, the Nettles will, in time, regenerate the land that so many generations fought to see free.

Rain seeps
through cracks
in stone foundations,

sprouting mushrooms
in empty corners
of musty rooms,

cool and dark
like the forest
that stood there

before
the first stones
were laid.